

Curriculum in the Age of Globalization

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Abstract

When Canadian students are asked their perceptions of Mexico, their answers are filled with stereotypes from the media. When they are asked about Darfur, they have no idea what or where Darfur is, or what has occurred there. When they are asked to list the names of famous Canadians they state the names of white men, primarily politicians. When they are asked to name famous historical figures from non European nations, they become silent. These stereotypes and silences are the products of the “absent curricula” in BC, and they make the aim of creating Global Citizens at a time of Globalization, almost impossible. This paper explores the reasons for these stereotypes and silences through a study of BC’s curricula and provides suggestions as to how to address them.

The Absent Curricula

BC’s Social Studies curricula are Canada-centred. From Kindergarten to Grade 11, students in BC learn primarily about Canada, along with a little European History. Students learn very little World History, and the history that they do learn is either Ancient History or primarily European History. Thus, in grade 7 students learn about Ancient Civilizations (Ministry of Education, 2006). In grade 8, while teachers are given a choice of which Civilizations between 500 and 1500 AD they choose to teach, the guide continues to reinforce European civilization with statements such as “identify periods of significant cultural achievement, including the Renaissance” (Ministry of Education, 1997). The aim seems to be to review European history from 500 to 1500, in order to prepare students to learn Canada’s story in grades 9, 10 and 11 (Ministry of Education, 1997; Ministry of Education, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2005). In grade 9, students study Canadian and European History from 1500 to 1815, with a focus on early Canadian History (Ministry of Education, 1997). In grade 10, students study Canadian history from 1815 to 1914, with very little change in focus between the 1997 guide and the new 2005 guide (Ministry of Education, 1997; Ministry of Education, 2005).

In grade 11, students learn primarily about Canada in the twentieth century by studying the Canadian government and Canada’s participation in the World Wars, at the end of which Social Studies is no longer compulsory (Ministry of Education, 2005). Students are only briefly introduced to the rest of the world by (a) “assess[ing] Canada’s participation in world affairs with reference to human rights, United Nations, Cold War, modern conflicts” (presumably in a positive way) and (b) learning about the population pyramid and comparing “Canada’s standards of living with those of the ‘developing world’,” without explanation of how these developed (Ministry of Education, 2005). The guide clearly aims to develop national feeling and identity at the expense of knowledge of World History.

The optional grade 12 History course focuses on European and Canadian History during the twentieth century (Ministry of Education, 2006). It does have some world history by including introductory content on the Middle East, Asia (particularly China), South Africa, and the United States, but the curriculum has a definite Western European slant and only for a few, twentieth century world events that have had a significant impact on (or have been the result of Western actions) are presented. China, for example, is studied in the context of the “emergence of China in world affairs” (Ministry of Education, 2006). One could argue that China has always been part of world affairs. Human rights are focused on with regard to South Africa and the United States, and not their abuses in other nations. The new Social Justice 12 course (Ministry of Education, 2008) contains the potential for some current world history that is not only Western and is less Eurocentric in orientation but it is not being taught very often. Significantly, both History 12 and Social Justice 12, as optional courses, will not be taken by the majority of BC students. BC students will graduate with little, if any, knowledge of World History. Thus, the histories of other nations are largely absent from BC curricula, even when this history is inter-twined in that of Canada’s history, for example, the history of colonialism. One must wonder why global history is not considered necessary for students to study, when it is such a vital component to understanding globalization and inequality in our world today. In a study of BC students’ and teachers’ conceptions of Social Studies I conducted, BC students themselves made comments on their desire to learn more than the history of Canada:

Canada’s history is not interesting. I find that my peers and I get really bored and stop listening. I would really love to learn world History but instead they limit it to just Canada’s history.

As a Canadian, I believe that Socials should do more of American history as well. I feel we are extremely biased towards Canadian/British history.

Colonial Heritage and Oppression

The curriculum is focused primarily on Canada, as the government aims to develop a feeling of nationhood and pride in Canadians, yet it is an incomplete history as it is based mostly on selected Canadian Historical events, with a little European History thrown in to context the study. Students who come through this curriculum will graduate with little, if any, knowledge of the histories of multiple nations in the world-- the “absent curricula” of BC. This might foster an insular feeling and lack of knowledge or interest in other nations who are only briefly introduced as either Ancient Civilizations (grade 7) or lesser (“developing”) to Canada in grade 11 in BC students. Curricula may reinforce stereotypes and ignorance of other nations. It will, consequently, fail to create global citizens, at a time when the world is increasingly globalized. Students may have difficulty making sense of World Events as they lack the historical knowledge with which to make accurate observations. They might view the Non-Western world only as a “third world,” filled with deprivation, hunger, and rapid population growth, not as nations with their own histories and unique identities and accomplishments.

I have spent time living and studying in Mexico. When I came back to Canada, people wondered how I managed to live in a nation of drugs and violence. In fact, Mexico was a fantastic nation, filled with a rich, vibrant and complex culture and history. It was warm and welcoming, yet struggling with globalization forces beyond its control. The poverty found in Mexico, understood as material poverty and not poverty of culture or history (a distinction worth making and not clearly done so in current BC curricula), is a direct product of colonial history. When the Spanish conquistadors arrived, the Mexican city of Tenochtitlan was one of the largest cities in the world, with an estimated population of 200,000. It was a city of canals, similar to Venice and stunning in appearance. One conquistador stated:

...Mexico was quite as large as Seville or as Cordoba...it probably stood more ground than either of those cities, and its position was (and is) incomparably fine. The great volcanoes in the distance, the cultivated plain, the lakes, then covered with canoes that went and came in hundreds, the canals which gave an air of Venice, the drawbridges, the busy, chattering crowds, the temples and high towers, the look as of a capital of a great state, the wealth and the bright climate, all combined to fill the imagination of men who from the day that they were born had fought with poverty. Here was the dreamed of El Dorado, at last patent to all their eyes. Here was the nation of idolaters that they were providential instruments to save. Lastly, here was the gold that sanctifies, that wipes out bloodshed, atones for cruelty, makes man as God...” (Diaz del Castillo, p. 108)

Fresh water was transported in by aquifers, and a well developed, culturally-rich, hierarchical society was present. It was a prosperous and wealthy city, without mass numbers in hunger. Today, Mexico City has a polarization of economic wealth and much poverty that is a direct result of the exploitative attitudes brought by the Spanish to Mexico, which wrenched people’s abilities to sustain themselves away from them through the taking of land and the imposition of particular forms of oppressive knowledge. This exploitative mentality remains today, for example, in the factories of Western companies, the *Maquilladoras*, which are built in Mexico as corporate bosses know they can pay low wages that reinforce poverty, continuing a colonialist tradition of exploiting others for personal gain. In fact, poverty around the world is growing a rapid rate, not decreasing. As a result of globalization, the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer worldwide (Bauman, 1998). Students should understand these economic and technological forces and the manner in which they are transforming our world in negative ways. They should explore the interrelations between colonial and capitalist forms of thinking and the exploitation of others. This study is complimented with an exploration of Human Rights. In BC, Human Rights are briefly introduced in grade 11, but—again—through the lens of Canada’s “contribution” to the world through Human Rights actions and legislation. Insufficient content is included regarding Canada’s denial of Human Rights to its First Nations, or its refusal to sign the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights which it helped to author. Further, there is no exploration of the abuse of human rights occurring around the world today, such as the genocides of Darfur and Serbia/Bosnia.

BC’s curriculum is focused on telling an incomplete story of Canada and its place in the world, as the government aims, and has aimed, to build national pride through schools (Author, 2008a). Ever since a competition to create a textbook that would tell Canada’s story of nationhood in a manner that generated nationalism just shortly after Confederation, the content of Canada’s Social Studies (then History) curriculum has changed little (Tompkins, 1986; Author, 2007). The curriculum omits much and often teaches a mythological-like story of “Canada’s” unfolding in order to develop nationalism, not global awareness.

Tuhiwai Smith (2006) describes school curricula, or “knowledge,” as a cultural construction that can be used to oppress and exclude. She presents the story of colonialism as one in which European nations studied and classified other nations, creating “knowledge” that legitimated their superiority and was transmitted through colonial structures such as schools. This is clearly evident in Canada’s treatment of First Nations people at residential schools. Yet, today, BC’s curricula remain primarily focused on telling a story of Canada’s development that continues this tradition: by telling only the story of the nation, itself imbued with a number of myths (Francis, 1997), curricula continue to exclude the histories of other nations and people. Curricula, in other words, continue a colonial narrative that oppresses (by absence or exclusion) others, excepting those considered equal: Europeans. By only presenting other nations as either Ancient Civilizations (grade 7) or as “developing nations” in contrast to Canada (grade 11), curricula excludes and delegitimizes the stories, people, and achievements of other nations.

A More Global Education

In order to develop a better understanding of our world today, as well as foster critical thinking, students should be introduced to the histories of many nations, both past and present. They should learn, for example, of the colonialism of South America and its violent Revolutions for Independence, and the similarities and differences of these events to North American history. They should be aware of the negative results of colonialism at work across the globe, and the continuing struggle of people to emerge from these troubled histories (Tuhiwai Smith, 2006). They should know of China’s grand tradition of isolationism and absolutism and its transformation to an Economic powerhouse with human rights abuses. They should understand the history that has lead to wars of the Middle East. They should study World History to the present, for the present is what remains of the past. If the present is the past and the world has been full of actors interacting in the past to create the present, students can’t understand our world today unless they have knowledge of this history (Author, 2008b).

Further, global citizens are individuals who not only have knowledge (and context knowledge) but also have developed a number of key values and skills including critical thinking and empathy. Students will have trouble developing empathy if they have little knowledge of the histories of other nations. They may feel superior to other nations, as curricula have a definite pro-Canada tinge. In order to develop empathy, students should learn about Human Rights, and not from the brief angle of Canada’s role in relation to Human Rights, or only briefly in elective grade 12 courses (Social Justice 12—again primarily within a Canadian context). They should learn what Human Rights are, and where (and why) human rights abuses are occurring in the world. They should learn of Darfur, of the Ethiopian famines, and their association with European colonialism and globalization today. They should understand the forces shaping our world today, including Globalization. Integrating more of the Social Sciences can be one of the ways to enrich a contemporary study of our world. Before describing the details of this curriculum, this paper will describe curricula in some other nations and provinces for comparison.

Canada, US and UK Curricula

BC has a history of copying American educational trends (Author, 2007). This is apparent in the US curricula for the state of California (California Department of Education, 2005). It is very similar to BC, except that “Canada” is replaced for the “United States.” Thus, in grade 6, students study the Ancient World to 500. In grade 7, they study the Medieval and Modern World to 1789. Their medieval studies cover a breadth of nations including China, India, and Islam nations, but they also focus on only European History during the “modern” age. In grade 8, they explore the growth of the US from 1783 to 1914, continued in grade 10 to the present. In the grade 10 course, students study Colonialism and World Wars and Nationalism in Non Western Nations. The histories of Non Western nations emerge again only briefly in a case study of India during a study of Colonialism and a study of the Nationalism of the Non Western Nations in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Russia during the Twentieth Century. The focus on American history continues in grade 11 with a study of Twentieth Century history. The grade 9 course is an elective course in some of the Social Sciences. In grade 12, students study American Democracy and Economics. The document states that, “This interplay between world and United States history helps students recognize the global context in which their nation’s history developed,” (California Department of Education) but—like in BC—the only other history that is seen worthwhile to study is largely European History. Other nations’ histories are either ancient or introduced as an issue, such as Nationalism, yet—ironically, both the BC and Californian curricula specifically focus on building national identity. The similarity between BC’s and California’s curricula is eerie—they both must be based on the same foundational view of what Social Studies is and how it should be taught that was common at the

turn of the Twentieth Century (Kliebard, 1998; Author, 2008a).

Some American states including Kentucky, New Jersey, Arkansas, and Oregon have brought in World History studies (Woyach). In Oregon, for example, the curriculum is quite different to that of California. It takes a more structure of disciplines approach by having students study content from Political Science (ie. Government), Economics, Geography, and History. Further, while curricula do maintain a U.S.-focused approach, students are given some opportunities to study other nations and do study more contemporary history, as illustrated in the standard: “Understand how nations interact with each other, how events and issues in other countries can affect citizens in the United States, and how actions and concepts of democracy and individual rights of the United States can affect other peoples and nations” (Oregon Department of Education, 2003). This includes a study of international and regional organizations. Students are also introduced to different political and economic systems around the world. In addition, they are to: “Understand and interpret events, issues, and developments within and across eras of world history” (Oregon Department of Education, 2003). This standard includes studying the events and impact of colonialism in Asia and Africa and significant events from the histories of Japan, China, Russia, Mexico and India. Further, when studying American History, students are given a more balanced view of history as they learn of negative actions by government and people such as racism and harmful treatment of Indigenous people and slavery. They study the continuation of racism as illustrated by the Ku Klux Klan and other groups. Students also have the chance to explore an issue, such as racism, migration, technological change, environmental degradation, and unequal resource distribution, in detail. They explore the issue using the various Social Sciences and then consider possible solutions and actions that address the issue. Students are introduced to more Social Science content in contemporary explorations of our world today, as illustrated by the standard to “point out specific situations where human or cultural factors are involved in global conflict situations and identify different viewpoints in the conflict; create scenarios under which these cultural factors would no longer trigger conflict ” (Oregon Department of Education, 2003). The curriculum, in short, is framed very differently to that of BC and California, using an approach that is Social Science-like in style and that introduces and covers a broader range of disciplines and Historical events in a more balanced manner, and that includes more World History. While it is not perfect, it provides an interesting alternative that is worth studying.

Other nations and provinces have also made attempts to move beyond the use of history to develop nationalism. Mexico, for example, has students study Mexican and World History and Geography. They also introduce students to the study and importance of Human Rights in our world today and aim to develop a feeling of empathy for others (Plan de Estudios, 2007). Their curricula are rich in the arts, as well. Despite the manner in which globalization forces are affecting Mexico negatively, their curricula still aim to create empathy for others. Perhaps they have something to teach us?

Nova Scotia has a grade 12 Global History course (Department of Education, 2003). Although it has shortcomings, such as continuing to stereotype the “South” as disadvantaged in all ways to those of Westerners (the “North”) and portraying a simplistic and positive notion of “globalization” similar to that of “world community,” at least the province aims to introduce students to the forces of globalization and to the history of Twentieth century. Unfortunately, however, the course is an optional grade 12 course.

UK’s curricula are quite British-Eurocentric. However, they do provide some opportunities to explore a little world history. Students learn about the impacts of colonialism and are introduced to: “the impact of significant political, social, cultural, religious, technological and/or economic developments and events on past European and world societies” (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2009). Students are also introduced to “political, legal and human rights and freedoms in a range of contexts from local to global” (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2009).

Curriculum Outline

This paper recommends the implementation of new curricula in BC that are relevant to our times and necessary to understanding our age (Waks, 2006), and that are more “truthful,” in that they encompass more “stories,” within the context that history is always interpretation (Author, 2008b). The proposed curricula can include the following components:

Knowledge:

- Global History, expanded to look beyond a study of Canada in the Global Context, that includes Colonial Histories, American History, and Non Western Histories of Asian countries such as China, African Nations such as Kenya and South Africa, and Latin American nations such as Mexico. This curriculum should be developed by a curriculum committee composed of international scholars from a number of nations who dialogue together to agree on which events are considered of sufficient significance on the world stage to be included in this course, and not by a curriculum committee composed only of Western Historians, as these will have a natural bias towards Western History.
- Twentieth century history up to the present moment, including the African famines and genocides in Serbia and Darfur.
- An introduction to Human Rights and case studies illustrating positive and negative human rights situations.

Values: Caring (Noddings, 2003), Diversity, Equity, Awareness and Open-mindedness (Hare, 1979).

Attitudes: Empathy and Empowerment.

Skills: Critical-creative thinking (Passmore, 1967), researching information, and identifying bias.

Pedagogical Strategies

Curricula, so far in this paper, have been understood as documents that list programs of study, with regard to the knowledge, values, and skills students are to acquire. However, “curricula” has many meanings and can be “lived” quite differently than articulated in public documents. This section, as a consequence, describes some of the pedagogies that can be used to “teach” the curricula, so that it can be “experienced” (lived) by students.

Firstly, Global History is a vast field. Students cannot possibly be expected to master all of it, so approaches can include: (a) the teaching of a general global history frame outlining key world events, followed by (b) students exploring one country’s history in depth through a research project, which can then be presented to their peers or “published” on line or in a small class reader. Students should be allowed to choose a country that is of interest to them, perhaps one that they have connections to. This is appropriate at a time when Canadian high school students are increasingly diverse in their backgrounds and Canada calls itself a Multinational nation. This history can be brought up to the present moment and should explore how global forces are transforming that country today. The project should include teaching students how to research information and how to ensure that the knowledge they find is reliable knowledge by analyzing who “wrote” the information and comparing multiple interpretations of events. This ability to “manage” knowledge is vital in our knowledge society (Waks, 2006).

Secondly, students can study current events around the world in depth by exploring not just topical events, but the histories and forces that “created” these events. Students can present weekly current events topics which are then expanded upon on a Current Events Board. They can be introduced to the issues and values that underlie these events in order to develop their critical thinking and their empathy. They can work in groups to brainstorm solutions to these current events and issues, after they have been taught problem solving skills. Their solutions can include conflict resolution simulations and writing that asks them to explore the issue from the opposite point of view to the one they support. This knowledge and these skills will be invaluable to students as adults.

Students can also engage in real actions that build knowledge and empathy. Amnesty International (2009) has resources on their website that provide both knowledge and empowerment activities for students, such as writing letters, that address globalization forces. Global issues, such as inequality and Human Rights abuses, can be explored through historical and contemporary historical studies in class and supplemented by service in the community which supports the issue explored. For example, if students want to explore poverty, they can study the information provided on Amnesty International’s site (and others such as Oxfam). They can then explore the histories that led to this issue. In this case, increasing global poverty is associated with philosophies of exploitation related to colonialist ideologies that continue today in philosophic orientations driving globalization.

Assessment

This paper supports Authentic Assessment, rather than testing of rote learning. It, thus, recommends that assessment be focused on the teachers’ marking of student projects and of the assignments described in the previous section and not on multiple choice, fact-based tests.

Managing Resistance

Recently, I attended a specialist association meeting for high school teachers. At that meeting, some of the teachers expressed negative views towards scholars and the Ministry of Education. This is not the first time I have heard such views. Teachers, in other words, might resist the attempt to implement yet another curriculum revision. Indeed, American curriculum scholars (Snyder et al., 1989) have recognized that curriculum documents have little chance of being implemented if they are not supported by teachers, as the taught curriculum can be very different to the prescribed curriculum.

Strategies to get teachers' support include the following: a Professional Development Day Conference that exposes teachers to the myths of the Canadian History they are teaching their students. Francis (1997) gives a good starting point. Having teachers explore these myths can open their eyes to some of the problems of the curricula they are teaching to their students. Further, teachers should be introduced to the concept of globalization and statistics of its immense power to reshape our world. They should learn about how it is increasing inequality. They can then be helped to explore why teaching this to their students is important and how it can be achieved. They can be given excellent ready-to-try lessons and resources and examples of activities. As well, they can study examples of alternative curricula that attempt to address these issues, such as the curricula of Oregon and Mexico described above, the latter of which might help to explode some stereotypes with regards to what "development" means. Teachers are ethical and caring individuals. If they see the importance of this curricula and the manner in which it will enrich their students' lives, they can be brought to support it.

Conclusion

At a time of Globalization, students should be educated in a way that is going to help them understand and manoeuvre successfully through our world. This requires rethinking curricula that has been entrenched in BC schools ever since public schools were developed 150 years ago. This new curricula should explore Global History, past and present, and the massive forces of "globalization" that are rapidly transforming our world. This is not only fair to our students, but also necessary if we hope to graduate global citizens who have some chance of affecting positive change.

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